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Post-Shaheinab Neolithic remains at Geili

The final reflections on the results of years of excavations do certainly provide conclusions, but they often give rise to so many doubts and new questions as to encourage researchers to start the excavation again rather than to abandon the site. This is what happened at Geili after the publication of what was supposed to be the final report on the excavation of the site (Caneva 1988).

Geili is a village located along the road between Khartoum and Shendi, 47 km north of Khartoum, not far from the present course of the Nile. The archaeological site covers an area of about 160x180 m, which is now almost entirely included in the modern village. It was excavated by the Italian Mission during six campaigns between 1972 and 1981. The site showed the superimposition of several millennia of human occupation, from the Early Neolithic settlement of 5500 years ago through the Early Meroitic, Late Meroitic, Christian and Islamic cemeteries, up to the present century. Each of these cultural contexts at Geili was heavily disturbed by the subsequent ones, since the newcomers were not settling on the top of the earlier deposits but were digging graves into them. After the excavations ended, the detailed analysis of the innumerable typological characteristics of the graves and of their fragile stratigraphic connections gradually led to the formulation of hypotheses which had not previously been considered. There appeared, therefore, to be no alternative to the resumption of the excavation to test the new ideas in the field.

The new excavation, which started in 1991, confirmed the general statements on the characteristics of the site: first, the geological genesis of the Nile silt bar where the Neolithic groups settled after the westward shift of the Nile; second, the non-stratification of the Early Neolithic archaeological deposits and, finally, the shallowness of these deposits, whose sediments were repeatedly redistributed on the surface and deflated by the wind after the digging of each tomb during the five millennia which followed.

It is unlikely that more information can be obtained for the early settlement, owing to the heavy disturbance caused to the Neolithic site by the establishment of the later cemetery. The latter evidence, however, required the confir-

mation of some statements, especially as regards the analysis of human bones, which needed to be applied to a larger population sample for the different periods represented. Moreover, the typology of the grave shaft and goods in each group, in the absence of comparable documentation for the Khartoum region, needed to be characterised more systematically. Finally, the reconstruction and interpretation of the cultural sequence represented at Geili needed to be confirmed by new data.

As already observed in the past (Caneva 1988), it was the most elevated part of the site, on the north-western quarter, that was found to be the richest in prehistoric remains, from both Early and Late Neolithic times. It was therefore here that the new field research was undertaken (Fig. 1).

About 50 new tombs were located, most of which were Meroitic graves from different periods. As expected, the Late Neolithic graves, the earliest in the cemetery, were very few (only nine or ten) and were preserved only in the small spaces which were left untouched between subsequently dug graves. However, the high frequency of these graves in proportion to the surface area, together with the number of human bone fragments which were found scattered both on the surface of the site and in the filling of the later graves, point to a high density of early burials being dispersed through time. This hypothesis is now supported by the finding of at least one case of superimposition of two Late Neolithic graves, something that had never been encountered before, although it was frequently found in the intensively used contemporary cemeteries excavated elsewhere, such as Kadada and Ghaba, in the Shendi province. This superimposition might suggest a long lasting Neolithic use of this cemetery, but it might also testify to an intentional association of the two graves as family burials, as already suggested for the contemporary cemetery at Kadada (Reinold 1982).

In the Late Neolithic graves at Geili, both bones and shafts are usually in extremely poor condition, not only because they are the oldest ones, but also because they are at such a shallow depth that any small amount of digging or even tramping on the surface affects them. Their present depth never exceeds 25-30 cm, as a result of a long lasting wind deflation, which seems to have removed about 80 cm of the original soil sediment. This particularly marked surface deflation was very probably due to the frequent digging of graves which, by continuously renewing the presence of soft soil on the surface, always prevented in this site the formation of the gravel cap which has instead protected most of the desert sites in this region from wind erosion.

Most of the still preserved Neolithic graves have been disturbed or mutilated by the digging of later pits (Fig. 2). In most cases, therefore, no trace of grave goods was left. However, Late Neolithic pottery and other objects were often found in the filling of the Meroitic or Christian graves, suggesting that the Neolithic burials were not as poor as they now appear to be.

The general scarcity of grave goods makes it difficult to attribute many of the graves in this cemetery to their respective cultural and chronological contexts.



Fig. 1. Geili. Older (gray squares) and recent excavations (dark squares).

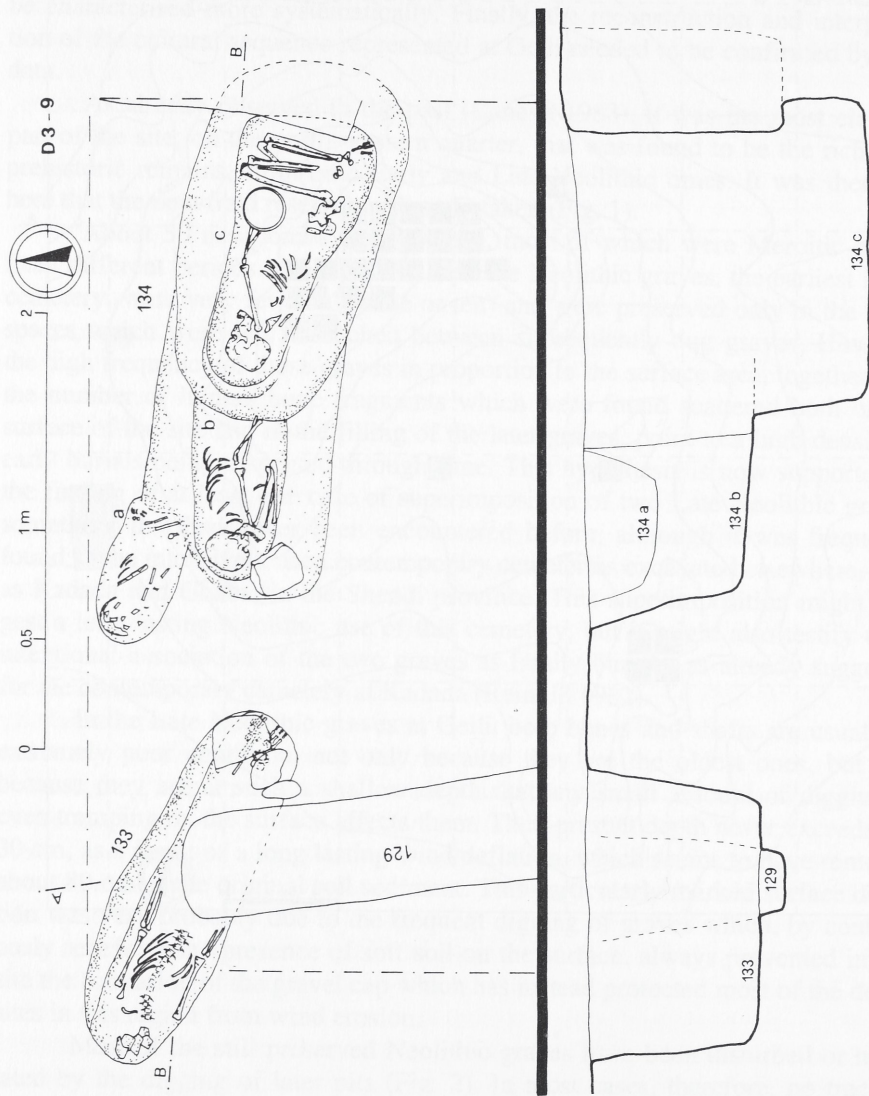


Fig. 2. Geili. Superimposition of graves from different periods.

In such a situation, a reliable attribution can be made by using a combination of factors rather than a single element. The shape of the grave is usually not preserved in the loose soil of the matrix. However, both the position of the skeleton and the preservation of the bones seem to be diagnostic elements at Geili. The Neolithic bones are white and fragile, often so crumbled that little more than their imprint is found on the soil. The skeletons lie in a tightly contracted position, knees and hands to face, which is similar to that used in the Mesolithic burials but very different from the contracted position later adopted by Meroitic groups in this region. Christian burials have the same orientation, but the skeletons lie on their backs, in an extended position. A further diagnostic element is the relative stratigraphic position of the graves. As already observed in the past, the progressive erosion of the site results in the inverse stratigraphy of the graves. The most recent, such as the Christian or Islamic graves, are the deepest because their matrix was kept virtually intact during the few centuries from when they were dug, whereas the earliest graves gradually came closer to the surface during millennia of wind deflation and are thus now in the uppermost position.

The results of the new investigations on the Late Neolithic burials at Geili can be summarised in the two following considerations:

- 1) The position of the skeleton is tightly contracted, lying on its right side with a west-east orientation and facing south. This seemed already to be a recurring characteristic at Geili and was consistently confirmed in all the graves excavated in 1991. The same characteristics seem to occur in the Neolithic graves at Shaheinab and Kadero, in the same province, whereas they were only seldom observed at the contemporary cemetery of Kadada, farther north. It is therefore now possible to refer confidently to these features as part of the late Neolithic burial customs peculiar to this particular region. The contracted position of the skeleton and the same W-E orientation of the grave in this region also characterise the entire development of the Meroitic cemeteries, unlike the cemeteries from other regions, suggesting the existence of regional traditions which persist through time and cultural changes.
- 2) The second important point is that two more elements, discovered in the same grave for the first time ever, should be added to the number of archaeological objects with similarities to those of Kadada: a large-size grey stone disk mace head and some malachite fragments which were held in the hands of the deceased. Malachite fragments were found in several tombs at Kadada, in the same context and often held in the same way as at Geili, in the hands of the deceased.

The disk mace head is the first of this size found at Geili, where only small ones were known. It is, in this shape and size, a common type at Kadada (Reinold 1982). Other comparisons with grave goods from the Kadada cemetery were already observed in the stone palettes, in some of the clay figurines, in the beads and in the pottery, particularly in one plate decorated with a composition of plain

and incised bands, both outside and inside, which was found to be identical in the two sites.

The Geili Late Neolithic group was contemporary and probably had (trade?) links with that of Kadada, but it belonged to a local population which consistently maintained regional traditions in its funerary practices. This evidence would suggest the existence of different groups which inhabited different regions and kept their own traditions, although they exchanged items with their neighbours and shared broadly common cultural traits.

In conclusion, the new findings emphasize the previously observed dichotomy between the more traditional and regionally characterised funerary rites, and funerary offerings, which are usually more standardised and are therefore comparable over a larger area. This dichotomy, which can already be observed in the scanty remains of the Neolithic cemetery, is even more evident in the Early Meroitic and Late Meroitic graves and is possibly the most interesting discovery made at this site.

References

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